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Using Conceptual Metaphors Manifested in Disney Movies to Teach English Idiomatic Expressions to Young Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study attempts to put into practice a strategy (as using conceptual metaphors manifested in Disney Movies) for teaching English idiomatic expressions to young EFL Learners proposed by Rodriguez & Moreno (2009). Given the importance and difficulty of learning idioms, one could be tempted not to lose the golden opportunity of teaching idioms to children. So, this study applies this theoretically proposed strategy on young Iranian EFL learners in real context of classroom. The results revealed high effectiveness of cooperation of conceptual metaphors and their visual manifestations in Disney Movies in teaching English idiomatic expressions to young Iranian EFL Learners.

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1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions are present in all languages and they constitute an important part of every language indicating the proficiency of their speakers alongside other indicators. Particularly, when it comes to learning a foreign language, the importance of familiarity with and comprehension of idioms in the target language becomes more marked. Idioms are the windows into the thought, experiences and culture of the people of every language

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which serve as valuable tools to help learners integrate into the culture of the target language. They are also a feature of natural and communicatively normal talk. Hence, EFL learners and teachers cannot avoid the world of idioms.

Traditionally, metaphor was seen only as a figure of speech which had nothing to do with ordinary language and was limited to poetry and rhetoric. However, so much attention has been recently paid to metaphoric and idiomatic expressions as a part of proficiency in a foreign language. In this trend, Danesi (1986, 1989, 1992, 1994, 1995 and 2003) leads the front. He coins the term "Metaphoric Competence" as "when L2 learners have attained a native-like MC (Metaphoric Competence), it may be said they are conceptually fluent" and states that metaphoric and idiomatic expressions should be incorporated in L2 curricula for being conceptually fluent is also necessary to fully learn a language. Danesi (1994) also believes that learners' speech is unnatural because they have not developed conceptual fluency and their speech is mere literal.

Kecskes and Papp (2000) believe that acquiring conceptual knowledge is as important as acquiring grammatical and communicative knowledge for learners of a new language. They argue that learners' knowledge use will be significantly different from that of native users if they develop only grammatical and communicative knowledge. Boers, less strictly, argues that developing "metaphor awareness" is necessary rather than the ability to generate metaphors in the L2, so that learners will at least be able to "organize the steady stream of figurative language they are exposed to." (2000a: 564). Likewise, Littlemore (2001: 484) suggests that "the ability to interpret metaphors quickly in conversation can be a crucial element of interaction." In addition, Littlemore & Low (2006a) argue that metaphoric competence can help all aspects of communicative competence and should be incorporated in curricula from the early stages.

However, as "idiomatic expressions are conventionalized expressions whose overall meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of their constituent parts" (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009: 662), they are one of the troublesome areas of foreign language learning and teaching. On one hand, EFL learners should make more effort mastering at least a number of these idiomatic expressions and on the other hand, EFL teachers should try harder to reduce the burden of learning such expressions on the learners' shoulders.

Regarding these challenges, researchers and EFL teachers have concentrated on the ways the learners interpret, comprehend and use idioms as well as the ways the teachers can teach idioms more fruitfully. Subsequently, different strategies and approaches to teaching idioms have come up.

2. A Cognitive Approach

As idioms have long been seen of arbitrary nature, they have put aside to be interpreted by contextual clues and be memorized by rote-learning as there are no reliable clues inside the expressions themselves (Boers, 2000a; Li, 2005). However, the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and in turn the effect of their ideas on the study of metaphor made researchers to look at metaphoric and idiomatic expressions differently.

The two researchers claimed that metaphor is not only a matter of language, but a matter of thought. They examined patterns of metaphors in conventional language and showed that metaphors are not only pervasive in our everyday speech, but an element of human conceptual system.

Other researchers like Gibbs & O'Brien (1990); Lakoff (1993); Gibbs (1997); Boers (2000a) and Krishna (2006) contend that idiomatic meaning is not arbitrary; that most idioms can be categorized in metaphor patterns in our conceptual system, and so, the idiomatic meaning is motivated by conceptual metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson further in development of their ideas coined the term 'conceptual metaphor' which "is used to refer to a connection between two semantic areas at the level of thought, such as the metaphorical connection between anger and fire for speakers of many languages" (Lakoff, 1987 in Deignan et. al., 1997: 352). Regarding the distinction between linguistic and conceptual metaphor, cognitive linguists point out that while conceptual

metaphors rest on the level of thought and form mental schemas which the human mind uses to establish correspondences across abstract concepts and concrete terms, linguistic metaphors are the concrete realization of conceptual metaphors in language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Thus, one can put the idiomatic expressions *to be fuming with anger*, *to be about to explode*, *to let off steam* or *to blow up* under the conceptual metaphor of ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER. It is worthy to note that in the course of recent researches on the conceptual metaphors (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Johnson, 1987; Gibbs, 2003), it has been revealed that a wide number of conceptual metaphors are universal across languages, particularly those which are concerned with simple bodily experiences such as HAPPINESS IS UP and SADNESS IS DOWN (as one can easily relate this upward and downward orientation to the state of happiness and sadness in daily life).

“According to Kövecses (2005) metaphors tend to be universal and near-universal at generic-level and specific-level metaphors tend to be different cross-linguistically. For instance, HAPPINESS IS UP is a generic-level metaphor and a specific-level version of the metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP in English is HAPPINESS IS BEING OFF THE GROUND” (Pirzad Mashak & Pazhakh & Hayati, 2012).

In case of Persian language, a comparative analysis done by Pirzad Mashak & Pazhakh & Hayati (2012) also showed that all conceptual metaphors of happiness found by Kövecses (1990, 2005) are shared by English and Persian.

"Adopting a cognitive approach, idiomatic expressions are seen as being motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors" (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009: 663). In this way, idiomatic expressions are not seen as independent linguistic metaphors based on the arbitrariness of language, but they are seen as being motivated by conceptual metaphors. The learners have not to memorize or repeat over and over the idioms to remember them and learn them by heart; but the teacher makes them aware of the systematic patterns underlying such expressions (Gibbs & Gonzales, 1985; Cacciari & Levoratto, 1998; Kövecses, 2002). Kövecses (2003: 311) points out that “the theory of conceptual metaphors is emerging as a new tool that is capable of providing serious assistance to both teachers and students in teaching and learning foreign languages.” He also believes that “the cognitive linguistic approach to metaphors and idioms, from the early stages of its application in foreign language teaching, has been believed to facilitate learning and long-term retention of [idioms]” (Kövecses, 2002: 201).

In his study, Boers (1999) sees the major advantage of the cognitive linguistic methodology as “systematicity”. This systematicity helps second language learners (L2) categorize metaphoric expressions under conceptual metaphors. Andreou & Galantomos (2008) also point to the same notion under the name of “grouping” as a vocabulary learning strategy which is effective in recalling words.

Others like Lazar (1996) and Littlemore (2001a) also suggest that the cognitive approach to metaphors and idioms can indeed assist L2 learners in learning and long-term retention.

As learning conceptual metaphors will provide a systematic approach to teaching of idiomatic expressions, it facilitates learning and processing information for language learners. As a result, researchers have used conceptual metaphor theory to teach idiomatic expressions in real context of EFL classrooms.

In his study, Guo (2007) used raising learners' awareness of conceptual metaphors as an instructional strategy to increase their ability to comprehend idiomatic expressions. The results of the study showed that enriching students' metaphor awareness by help of conceptual metaphors has a big influence on their comprehension of idioms.

The effectiveness of raising metaphor awareness as a teaching strategy for idiom teaching in foreign language teaching contexts has been also revealed by the results of some other controlled experiments. Boers (2000a, 2001) conducted a series of experiments and demonstrated that raising metaphor awareness of learners helps them in retention of figurative expressions. Similarly, Kövecses and Szabó (1996) conducted some short-scale surveys and concluded that L2 learners who were guided to use cognitive method outperformed the students who were guided to memorize the idioms.

Kömür & Çimen (2009) explored the effects of using conceptual metaphors in teaching idioms in a foreign language context. The participants who were first-year students of ELT and were taking the course “Lexical Competence” were included in a program containing activities that teach idiomatic expressions, their meanings and the logic behind them to improve learners' metaphoric comprehension. They found that this strategy improved learners' metaphor awareness and success in understanding idiomatic expressions.

Tabatabaei & Reisi Gahroei (2011) studied the impact of applying movie clips including idioms on the quality of idiom learning. In this study, 30 gifted high school students in experimental group received the treatment as teaching idioms using movie clips. They found that the experimental group outperformed the control one. Therefore, they suggested using movie clips and films in L2 idiom learning/teaching.

Rodriguez & Moreno (2009) propose a strategy for teaching and learning of idioms in the EFL classroom through Disney movies which illustrate two primary common conceptual metaphors as HAPPINES IS UP and SADNESS IS DOWN. They simply propose this strategy in a theoretic manner. They plan this strategy for young EFL learners. As they mention,

research into figurative language in recent years and its application to EFL teaching have provided insights that merit attention to the development of figurative competence in the EFL classroom ... however, when figurative language in EFL has been studied, it has almost exclusively been approached from its application to intermediate and advanced learners ... and in specialized discourse ... (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009:244).

They see a need to pay attention to fostering figurative competence at early stages of the learning process. They argue that based on related studies (e.g. Vosniadou, 1987; Zurer, 1990; Winner, 1998), children can interpret figurative usages and associate basic concepts such as happiness or sadness with upward and downward orientation respectively. They argue that parents and caretakers who are the source of affection and comfort are spatially above the child. They also point to the walking and falling experience of children. In addition, they point to body posture and facial gestures when we feel sad or happy, as when we are sad “we droop, bow our heads and drop our eyes, whereas when we are happy, we usually have an erect posture, raise our heads and our lips spread upwards” (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009:245).

In another view, they see the spatial domain “particularly interesting because human experiences with space are held to be similar in different languages, since people are endowed with the same biological features and, therefore, are usually exposed to similar experiences with the environment” (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009: 246).

They suggest Disney movies like *Mary Poppins*, *Aladdin* and *Dumbo* for this purpose. They talk in detail about a scene in *Mary Poppins* and briefly suggest using *Aladdin* and *Dumbo*. They also give some guidelines and clues to teachers what to do in the course of the teaching plan.

Keeping all in mind, let us look at a strong tendency among Iranian parents wanting their children to learn English as a foreign language.

As a progressing tendency, Iranian parents want their children to start learning English from the early ages (from 3-year-old to the early puberty). This tendency is welcomed as the rate and quality of language learning in early ages is undoubtedly higher than any later ages. However, idioms are taught late in institutes or are put aside totally to be taken up in universities. Given the importance of idioms in any language and at the same time the difficulty of learning such expressions, one could be tempted not to lose the golden opportunity of teaching idioms to children.

Now the question is: How can it be done in a way appropriate to the children's instruction (in other words, how can it be done in an enjoyable and attractive as well as fruitful and least demanding way?)

This problem encouraged the researchers to take a “from theory to practice” movement originating from Rodriguez & Moreno's paper to teach idiomatic expressions to young Iranian EFL learners. Obviously, when a

strategy is put into practice, the strengths and weaknesses and applications come to the surface and further modifications and utilizations can be suggested. In addition, as the strategy used in this study implies, the cooperation of these two effective materials of teaching idiomatic expressions (i.e. movies and conceptual metaphors) can give extra effectiveness and attractiveness to teaching idiomatic expressions, particularly in classrooms allocated to young EFL learners. The last thing that adds to the significance of this study is the inclusion of young EFL learners in an idiom teaching plan.

As one can see, the literature suffers from a lack in the domain of teaching idioms to young EFL learners. As mentioned before, the strategy proposed by Rodriguez & Moreno (2009) seems so promising that is worthy to be put in practice carefully to be supported or modified for implementing in young EFL learners' instructional contexts.

3. The Study

The participants in this study were 40 schoolboys at a guidance school in Arak, Iran (age=12). They were subsequently divided in two groups: experimental and control group in this way that OPT (Oxford Placement Test) was administered and participants were divided into two groups (experimental and control group) based on their scores so that in each group there were participants with comparable low, intermediate and high scores. In addition, the number of students who attend classes in language institutes outside the school was kept equal in these groups. Next, the pre-test was administered to assess the initial command of idiomatic expressions among the participants. This test consists of a list of idiomatic expressions under the conceptual metaphors HAPPINESS IS UP and SADNESS IS DOWN for which the participants are asked to provide the meaning in Persian. This list is also prepared to constitute the idioms taught in the treatment as well as the content of the post-test. This list of idiomatic expressions was prepared using those mentioned in Rodriguez and Moreno's paper and some other idioms under concerned conceptual metaphors.

Table 1. Conceptual metaphors and their related idioms in the study	
Happiness is up	Sadness is down
To feel up	To fall into a depression
To be over the moon	To be under the weather
To be floating/walking on the air	To feel down
To cheer up	To sink one's spirits
To be in high spirits	To be down in the dumps
To have a high time	
To be on cloud nine	
To be on an up	
To be in seventh heaven	
To jump for joy	

Then, the experimental group was exposed to the practiced teaching strategy in this study using conceptual metaphors manifested in the selected Disney movies (the treatment); while at the same period, the control group received a conventional teaching strategy of idioms as embedded in short paragraphs.

Three selected Disney movies were *Mary Poppins*, *Aladdin* and *Dumbo* which were suggested in Rodriguez and Moreno's paper and visualize the concerned conceptual metaphors in the study (HAPPINESS IS UP, SADNESS IS DOWN). In the treatment, the three selected Disney movies were played in the classrooms in three sessions.

To explain the course of action taken place in the study, some examples can help. As Rodriguez and Moreno pointed out in their paper, there is a scene in *Mary Poppins* that truly and fruitfully visualizes the concerned conceptual metaphors in the study. Nanny Mary, Jane and Michael (the two children who Mary takes care of) and Bert go to visit Uncle Albert. When they arrive at his house, Albert is laughing hard and is near the ceiling floating in the air. Mary tells the children not to laugh and try to be serious to make Uncle Albert come down. But Bert cannot help laughing and goes up in the air as soon as he starts laughing. After a while, Jane and Michael also start laughing and go up. Mary has no choice and goes up too. They have tea and tell jokes and have a good time there. When it is the time to go home, Uncle Albert tells the children that the only way to get down is to think of something sad. He tries to say something sad and they become sad and gradually start coming down. However, again at the end of his story there is a humorous point and they go up again. Finally, Mary Poppins mentions returning home and leaving Uncle Albert. They all become and come down to the ground. This scene is really interesting and effective for showing the underlying conceptual metaphors.

In *Aladdin* also in the scenes when Aladdin and Princess Jasmine are happy being together on the magic carpet, they are in the air, over the moon and in the clouds; and when they want to depart they come down. In *Dumbo* also there is a scene when Dumbo is sad because he cannot fly and a great grey cloud is above his head.

As the examples show, the researchers provided a setting for the establishment of the conceptual metaphors in this step. The learners were guided to pay attention to the different emotional states of the characters as well as their physical location (up-down). By suggestion of Rodriguez and Moreno,

This could be easily done by asking the learners questions such as "Where is Uncle Albert when the children arrive?", "Is he happy or sad?", "Is Bert happy when he goes up in the air?", "Are the children sad when they get down to go home?" etc. These questions do not require elaborate answers on behalf of the students, for the main purpose is to establish the connection happiness is up/ sadness is down. At this stage, the visual support is more important than the linguistic realizations of the conceptual metaphors, for the main goal is for the students to come to terms with the embodied nature of figurative thought. Once the connection happiness-up/sadness-down has been established, the teacher should gradually introduce figurative uses which stem from this conceptual metaphor. (Rodriguez & Moreno, 2009:248)

Through these three movies, the learners came to the concerned conceptual metaphors and subsequently gain a mental schema of them.

On the other hand, control group was exposed to a conventional method of idiom teaching in English institutes or advanced levels of English teaching as embedded in short paragraphs. The paragraphs were read in the class, the students were encouraged to get the meaning of them and finally guess the meaning of the idiomatic expressions embedded in them. These idiomatic expressions were marked by bold face as the students had no confusion finding where the idioms are. An example of such paragraph is as follows:

Yesterday, John took an exam. He was so worried about his grade and thought about it all the night. Today his friend called him and said that he had gotten a very good mark. Now John **feels up** for passing his exam successfully.

After completing due sessions, the post-test (the same test as pre-test) was administered for both groups and the results of the two tests were compared to see whether the teaching strategy was effective or not and if it was, to see to what extent it could be fruitful. Finally, a questionnaire was given to the participants to evaluate the teaching strategies in this study.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2. Group statistics in pre-test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	20	.7000	.73270	.16384
Control group	20	.6000	.68056	.15218

Table 3. Group statistics in post-test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	2	14.950	.22361	.05000
Control group	2	6.9000	3.85118	.86115

As the data in tables indicate, the mean difference of the two groups was not significant at pre-test; while in post-test the experimental group's mean is clearly much higher than control group.

Table 4. independent samples test in post-test

Table 4: Independent samples test in post test									
Levene's Test									
for Equality of									
Variances									
t-test for Equality of Means									
					Sig. (2-	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					tailed)	Difference	Difference	Lower	Upper
	F	Sig.	t	df					
Equal variances assumed	80.802	.000	9.332	38	.000	8.05000	.86260	6.30376	9.79624
Equal variances not assumed			9.332	19.128	.000	8.05000	.86260	6.24538	9.85462

Table 5. independent samples test in pre-test

Table 1: Independent samples test and pre-test									
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances									
t-test for Equality of Means									
					Sig. (2- Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	t	df	tailed)	Difference	Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.089	.768	.447	3	.657	.10000	.22361	-.35267	.5526
Equal variances not assumed			.447	37.795	.657	.10000	.22361	-.35275	.55275

According to the data in tables 4 and 5, the outperformance of experimental group over control group can be correctly attributed to the teaching strategy applied on experimental group. Another point that is worthy to note is that the scores in post-test in experimental group are homogeneous. This fact can be related to this point that all students in experimental group could follow the movie and finally came to the underlying concept of those idiomatic expressions mentioned as the matter was a common experience not requiring analysis of words or text. The students in control group needed to analyze the text and come to the meaning of the paragraph to guess the meaning of idioms accordingly.

Considering the table below, it can be easily seen that at pre-test, students had no idea of the concept of idiom. However, in post-test in both groups there is improvement that can mean children can understand this concept.

Nonetheless, students in experimental group were much more successful at comprehending and retention of idioms owing to the applied strategy. The applied strategy for them was so friendly that quite all students in experimental group gained the total score of the test in post-test.

Table 6. Percentage of correct responses for each pre-test/post-test question by control and experimental groups

Idiom	Experimental group (%)		Control group (%)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
To feel up		100		40
To be over the moon		100		30
To fall into a depression		100		35
To be floating/walking on the air		100		45
To be under the weather		100		35
To cheer up	15	100	10	50
To be in high spirits		100		40
To feel down		100		40
To sink one's spirits		95		30
To have a high time		100		45
To be down in the dumps		100		40
To be on cloud nine	5	100	10	50
To be on an up		100		30
To be in seventh heaven	25	100	20	85
To jump for joy	25	100	25	95

Confirming previous findings in literature, conceptual metaphors helped the learners to comprehend the idioms easily and remember them even easier. Based on Andreou & Galantomos (2008), the grouping tool that conceptual metaphors lend the learners is very effective in retention.

A point which is seen in this table is the items correctly answered with highest number of students in both pre-test and post-test. As a matter of fact, those idioms which were identical or near identical or literally as well as semantically transparent were among the correct responses in pre-tests. These instances were to be in seventh heaven to be on cloud none to jump for joy and cheer up. This fact is compatible with the findings of those researchers who emphasize on the effect of L1 on L2 in the field of idioms (e.g. Irujo, 1986b; Gibbs, 1992; Honeck, 1997; Lontas, 2001; Simpson & Mendis, 2003).

Checking the sheets in post-test, generally, control group could remember that the main concept was about sadness and happiness but they could not remember which one was which; while experimental group had access to the grouping or categorizing tool provided by conceptual metaphors and there were few mistakes concerning the two conceptual metaphors.

A noticeable point that was seen was that control group had resorted to translation of the elements of the idioms which was not seen among experimental group. The researchers assume that the visual aid in experimental group has helped them to realize the wholeness of thee idioms better as they concretely see that we are relating these phrases

with an emotion or state in the movies. Another point is that control group relied heavily on external factors as context rather than idiom itself, so the rate of retention of the meaning of the idioms out of the context was low. In contrast, experimental group had access to systematic categorization of the conceptual metaphors and it in turn leads to high rate of retention.

In sum, the effect that visual material makes on the mind of children and systematic pattern or grouping that conceptual metaphors provide helped the learners in experimental group to encounter really easily with idioms which are considered a troublesome area for EFL learners.

Regarding the questionnaire, the participants in control group found idiom and learning them difficult, confusing and boring. However, participants in experimental group found idioms and learning them easy and enjoyable. They were so attracted especially to the style of teaching using movies. They mentioned that at first they were completely confused and they did not think to learn the material so easy and in this enjoyable way. Unlike experimental group, control group mentioned that teaching strategy applied to them was like that applied always in school and even now more troublesome and demanding.

5. Conclusion

In a “from theory to practice” movement, this study actually demonstrated that cooperation of conceptual metaphors and movies can be really helpful to young Iranian EFL learners. This strategy was proved enjoyable, appropriate and least demanding for children. The systematicity provided for learners in experimental group solved a complex problem so easy that rate of retention was high as seen in the results. Given the brilliant capacity of young learners for learning languages and difficulty and importance of learning idioms, the strategy put into practice in this study seems considerably interesting and fruitful.

This study brought the world of imagination and the world of language together all in an effort to use high capacity of young learners for learning a language.

The researchers recommend further research on other ages as well as examining the effectiveness of the two elements of this study (i.e. movies and conceptual metaphors) separately.

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